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## Parliamentary questions as strategic party tools

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### ABSTRACT

This article shifts the analysis of parliamentary oversight tools to the level of the political party, asking how political parties make use of written parliamentary questions. It theorises that the use of parliamentary questions is related to the ideological and electoral competition between political parties, borrowing from theories on issue competition and negative campaigning. It provides an empirical test, using data on written questions from the lower house in the Netherlands (1994–2014). The analysis shows that parties tend to put questions to ministers whose portfolios are salient to them, in line with issue ownership theories. Moreover they ask questions of both ministers from parties that are ideologically distant and those with whom they have considerable electoral overlap in line with studies of negative campaigning.

**KEYWORDS** Legislative studies; parliaments; parliamentary questions; political parties; the Netherlands

How do parliamentarians make use of parliamentary oversight tools, in particular written questions? In the literature on parliamentary questions two approaches have been prominent: the first focuses on the use of parliamentary questions as an *electoral* tool for *individual* MPs (Bailer 2011; Mayhew 1974; Russo and Wiberg 2010; Saalfeld 2011). The second examines the relationship between the media agenda and the parliamentary agenda as reflected by parliamentary questions (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Walgrave and Vliegenthart 2010, 2012). Despite the fact that we know that MP behaviour reflects the aims and strategies of their parties, most of this work aims to explain how many questions individual MPs ask or the topics they focus on. Political parties take a back seat in these analyses (but see Vliegenthart *et al.* 2011). This article aims to complement existing perspectives

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by shifting attention to the level of the political party: how do they make use of parliamentary questions as a strategic political tool?

Oral and written questions are mostly symbolic, because of their limited policy consequences (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014). In this way they are similar to other forms of political communication, in particular campaign communication. Parliamentary party groups use parliamentary questions not because they are usually interested in the answers the government provides, but in order to further their own interests. Parliamentary tools such as questions are used in the permanent election campaign between parties: parliamentary questions are the continuation of election campaigns by different means. In this article, we seek to extend this understanding of the use of parliamentary (oversight) tools by examining to what extent the use of parliamentary questions by parliamentary party groups can be explained by theories of party competition. In line with theories on issue ownership (Robertson 1976), we expect that parties ask questions about topics that they focused on in their manifesto (Green-Pedersen 2010): parties use parliamentary questions to maintain and defend their ownership of issues. However, issue competition is only one aspect of party competition. Drawing on theories about negative campaigning (Walter 2014), we propose that parties may choose to target or 'attack' ministers from parties that they compete with for voters, using parliamentary questions to attract negative attention to their competitors. This literature at the same time suggests that parties may choose to focus their attention on ministers from parties with which they disagree ideologically.

We aim to contribute to the understanding of how parties use parliamentary tools to further their electoral and policy aims (Bardi and Mair 2008; Green-Pedersen 2010; Strøm 1990). Focusing on these party-level factors is not just important in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of what drives parliamentary behaviour, but it is also relevant for political observers, journalists and citizens to evaluate the use of parliamentary questions. After all, the right of parliament to question the government is primarily intended to allow it to oversee the government. Asking questions of the government may allow members of parliaments to be well informed about and scrutinise government policies and practices. If these tools are, however, often used as party political tools, political observers, journalists and citizens should think about them differently: do political parties use their parliamentary oversight tools to check on the government or to fight a permanent election campaign?

Given our research aim, we explain not the number of questions asked or the topic of the question, but how many questions each party puts to each minister. We develop three theoretical expectations, namely that parties ask more questions of a minister (1) the more salient that minister's portfolio is to the party; (2) the greater the policy disagreements are between the party and the minister's party; and (3) the stronger the electoral competition is between

them. These expectations are tested, drawing on an analysis of parliamentary questions in the Netherlands (1994–2014). This country has previously been identified as a case of strongly unified party behaviour in parliament, due to its electoral system with semi-open list PR in a single national district (Louwerse and Otjes 2016). As such, it is an important case to examine to what extent questioning behaviour is party behaviour; here we can expect to find these effects to be strong and unaffected by other factors that may influence behaviour. Our analysis shows that issue saliency, ideological distance and electoral competition all contribute moderately strongly to explaining the variation in how many questions each party group puts to each minister.

## Understanding and explaining the use of oversight tools

Parliaments are expected to play a number of roles in a parliamentary democracy. Parliaments are legislatures that can propose, amend and pass legislation; they have important representative and deliberative functions; and, finally, parliaments have an oversight function: they are expected to assess and judge the appropriateness of government action (Auel 2007: 500). MPs have a number of oversight tools at their disposal: parliamentary inquiries, oral questions and written questions.

This article examines written questions. These tools are often considered symbolic because they are relatively weak. All an MP can do is ask the government to respond to their question concerning some societal issue. The government is generally required to provide a written answer, but this can be as short as one word. We are interested in written questions, however, because they are not necessarily structured by the parliamentary agenda. All other tools MPs have at their disposal, like oversight tools such as oral questions or legislative tools such as amendments, are limited by the parliamentary agenda. There is a limit on the number of oral questions that can be asked during parliamentary question time and the speaker has to allow an MP to ask their question. An MP cannot propose an amendment to the nation's tax code on their own. That really depends on whether parliament – represented either by the speaker or, in many parliamentary systems, the government (Döring 1995) – is willing to allocate time for a debate on the issue. Even parliamentary speech is strictly regulated in most parliamentary systems: agenda setting is usually strictly controlled by the government and even in parliaments with strong agenda-setting powers, the majority usually controls the schedule (Döring 1995). Parliamentary questions represent an almost unconstrained form of parliamentary behaviour, at least in those systems, such as the Netherlands, where there are no limits on the number and subject of the questions that can be asked. This allows us to see how parliamentary parties act when unconstrained by the parliamentary agenda.

### Issue competition

Students of parliamentary party behaviour have studied parliamentary oversight from the perspective of issue competition (Green-Pedersen 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Issue competition is an important concept in the field of party politics (Budge 2015; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Petrocik 1996; Robertson 1976). The key argument comes from Robertson (1976), who showed that parties do not necessarily take positions on issues, but promise voters, for example in their election manifestos, that they will prioritise some issues over others. This is particularly true for valence issues on which (almost) everybody agrees: high employment, economic growth or environmental protection. Some parties have a stronger reputation on such issues: they 'own' certain issues (Petrocik 1996; Walgrave *et al.* 2015). As Carmines and Stimson (1989: 6) succinctly put it: '[a]ll successful politicians instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not. The trick is to politicize the former and deemphasize the latter'.

A simple, cheap and effective way to maintain issue ownership and direct attention to issues on which the party is competent is through parliamentary questions (Green-Pedersen 2010: 350): they provide a way for opposition parties to force the government to talk about issues on which the opposition considers itself competent and expects the government to be less competent. Parties ask more questions about topics they 'own' in order to maintain issue ownership: they may be used to mark a party's territory vis-à-vis other parliamentary parties (Walgrave *et al.* 2015: 789–90). Moreover, they may be used by parties to signal to interest groups, party activists, journalists and voters that their MPs are 'working' on those issues. According to this theory, green parties will ask questions about the environment and radical right-wing populist parties will ask questions about immigration. We therefore expect there to be a relationship between issue saliency in a party's manifesto and issue saliency in parliamentary questions, i.e. which ministers are asked questions. This pattern may not necessarily be motivated by strategic considerations. Parties that talk a lot about issues in their manifestos and in parliamentary questions may simply be intrinsically motivated to solve those policy issues. Radical right-wing populist parties may genuinely want to solve what they perceive as an immigration crisis and may see parliamentary questions as a step in getting the government to address it. This brings us to our hypothesis<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) *Issue saliency hypothesis*: the more attention political parties spend on an issue in their election manifesto, the more parliamentary questions political parties will ask about that issue.

### Positional competition

We theorise that the use of parliamentary questions is not only a function of issue characteristics, like saliency, but also of the actors involved.

Parliamentary questions are a way to direct (negative) attention towards other political players. In that sense, parliamentary politics can be seen as the continuation of political campaigning by other means. This is probably even stronger for (written) questions than for other parliamentary tools, because of the mostly symbolic value of questions. Governments have to answer a parliamentary question, but they do not need to take any specific policy action (Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg 2011). While there are situations in which parliamentary questions do have tangible results, often the asking and answering of questions mostly outlines known positions of parliamentary parties and governments.

We borrow from the literature on negative campaigning in multiparty systems to examine which enemies parties choose to 'go negative on' (Walter 2014). The literature on negative campaigning identifies two different mechanisms. First, parties may target or 'attack' parties that are ideologically close to them, as these ideologically proximate competitors may appeal to the same voters. Focusing attention on their failures may be one way to convince those voters to jump ship. Second, parties may also want to bring the fight to parties on the other side of the ideological spectrum. 'Going negative' may reflect actual policy disagreements, when parties target their ideological opponents. The evidence on this issue is complex. The best research suggests that parties, particularly smaller ones, tend to focus on ideologically close parties, but also that when one controls for this effect parties tend to target the largest party on the other side of the left/right dimension (Walter 2014).

We propose to clarify some of these discussions by distinguishing between *ideological* and *electoral* similarity. On the one hand, parties are likely to target parties that have a *similar electorate*. The underlying motivation is strategic in nature: parties may seek to expose the policy failures of their close electoral competitors in order to convince voters not to vote for them but rather to switch to the 'attacking' party (Haynes and Rhine 1998: 3; Walter 2014: 3). At the same time, picking a fight with an ideologically proximate party may be unattractive because it may offend the voters who are sympathetic to the party (Ridout and Holland 2010: 627; Walter 2014: 3), i.e. exactly those that parties sought to attract by such attacks.

Parties could choose to direct their questions to parties that have a *different* policy platform. The underlying motivation could be ideological: parties target the parties whose policies they oppose. They simply have more actual substantive policy disagreement with a more ideologically distant minister (Ridout and Holland 2010: 627; Walter 2014: 3). The motivation could also be strategic: parties may want to avoid continually picking fights with parties that are ideologically proximate because these could be potential government partners in the future (Elmelund-Præstekær 2008: 33; Hansen and Pedersen 2008: 21; Walter 2014: 4). Moreover, by picking a fight with a party from the other side of the ideological spectrum, a party could seek to show voters, interest groups

and journalists that they offer a credible, but starkly different, policy alternative from the parties that are in government.

- (2) *Programmatic difference hypothesis*: the greater the policy distance between a parliamentary party and a minister's party, the more questions the parliamentary party will direct to that minister.
- (3) *Electoral similarity hypothesis*: the more a party's electorate overlaps with the electorate of a minister's party, the more parliamentary questions the parliamentary party will direct to that minister.

From a strictly Downsian perspective on party competition (Downs 1957), the programmatic difference hypothesis and the electoral similarity hypothesis would seem to be in direct contradiction: parties that stand close together are likely also to have overlapping electorates. Because of the characteristics of the Dutch system, which we are studying here, these two hypotheses do not contradict each other. Voting here is not just structured by a party's or a voter's left-right position but also by a voter's class and religion. This means that, for instance, a party like Christian-Democratic Appeal may have a left-right position close to that of the social-liberal Democrats 66, but because the Christian democrats appeal to religious voters and Democrats 66 voters are secular, their electorates overlap much less than one would expect. Moreover, the intensity of the electoral competition between two parties, defined in terms of electoral overlap, will also depend on the number of voters that consider voting for a party. A party considered by many voters might not actually regard a proximate but relatively unpopular party as a particularly important electoral competitor. In the dataset we use for our empirical analysis, there is no significant correlation between electoral competition and programmatic difference ( $r = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.74$ ).

### **Control variables**

Our analysis is primarily aimed at the party political correlates of asking parliamentary questions. We acknowledge that there are other factors that are relevant in explaining how many questions each party asks each minister. In particular, (1) party size, (2) opposition party status and (3) 'keeping tabs' on the behaviour of coalition parties may bias the conclusions regarding our main independent variables if omitted from the analysis.

Party size is of obvious importance: larger parties can be expected to ask more questions. At the same time, smaller parties might be ideologically more distant, meaning that our conclusions regarding programmatic differences might be due to party size if we do not control for this.

The relations between the executive and legislature are another important explanation of parliamentary behaviour (King 1976). We know that opposition parties are more active in asking questions than government parties



(Green-Pedersen 2010; Martin 2011a; Proksch and Slapin 2011; Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg 2011). Government and opposition parties have opposing interests: the government parties (usually) want to remain within the coalition and are unlikely to ‘rock the boat’ by asking parliamentary questions. Moreover, even if government parties have genuine policy concerns they can use informal means to obtain information or bring government attention to issues due to their close relation to the government. Opposition parties, on the other hand, have an interest in exposing the policy failures of the government: this draws negative attention to the government (Vliegenthart *et al.* 2013: 394). Therefore, we expect that opposition parties will ask more parliamentary questions than government parties.

The fact that opposition parties ask more questions than government parties does not mean that government parties do not use the tool at all. Coalition parties can be expected to focus their questions on their coalition partners in order to monitor them (Kim and Loewenberg 2005; Maatoug 2013; Martin and Vanberg 2004). They are unlikely to intensely scrutinise their own ministers: they are more likely to be satisfied with the policies they propose and have more options to address issues informally. Moreover, they do not want to tarnish the reputation of their own ministers, who are likely to be prominent candidates in the next election. Therefore, we expect that coalition parties will ask more questions of ministers who are not members of their own party, compared to their own ministers.

## Case selection

We study the usage of parliamentary questions by members of the Dutch lower house (*Tweede Kamer*). We approach parliamentary questions from a party perspective, despite the fact that recent studies see parliamentary questions as a form of individual representation (Bailer 2011; Russo 2011; Saalfeld 2011). In order to ensure that the effects we study are attributable to parties and not the result of individual incentives for MPs, we select a parliament where we know that electoral incentives do not affect parliamentary behaviour and instead parliamentary party groups exert control over MPs’ behaviour.

First, Louwerse and Otjes (2016) show that in the Dutch parliament, the *Tweede Kamer*, personalised electoral incentives are practically absent. This is because of the combination of the electoral system, the single district system and the actual behaviour of voters. The *Tweede Kamer* is elected in a single, national district, through a semi-open list system. Voters have a single vote, which they have to cast for a single candidate. Votes are aggregated per party in the single district. A party’s seats are filled by the candidates in order of the number of votes they received, but only if they received more than 25% of the electoral quota. If there are still seats left those go to the MPs in order of their list position. Even though every vote cast is a personal vote, these votes hardly

affect who is elected: between 2002 and 2010, almost 80% of the votes were given to the *first* candidate on the list and more than 90% of the personal votes were given to candidates who would have been elected anyway based on their list position.

Second, parliamentary parties play a major role in the way MPs operate. Parliamentary parties have strong internal organisations. MPs are not so much independent agents seeking to advance their own agenda, but rather they are their party's representative on a specific policy portfolio (Louwerse and Otjes 2015). They are essentially party delegates (Andeweg and Thomassen 2011; Mickler 2017: 188; Van Vonnö 2012). Within these parties MPs are embedded within internal organisations. There is a parliamentary party board or even a structure of party committees with the parliamentary party groups: nothing is submitted or sent out without prior consultation with this structure (Andeweg and Thomassen 2011; Mickler 2017: 191–3). These kinds of structure are not just standard practice in the Netherlands, but also in other systems with strong parliamentary parties, such as the German Bundestag (Mickler 2017).

Instead of having an individualised electoral incentive to work for their own votes, MPs in the Netherlands are embedded within parties. The activities of Dutch MPs are likely to reflect their parties' priorities. Therefore our hypotheses and analyses focus on the party level, rather than the individual MP.

We should note that the Dutch case in this respect is different from the British or Irish, where stronger individualised election methods, in combination with a different organisation of parliament, may lead to the expectation that the (opposition) party's front bench reflect their party strategies in questioning, while backbenchers will ask questions mainly to signal to their constituency that they are working for them. Still, we believe that analysing the Dutch case will contain lessons beyond the particular case. First, the Netherlands is not the only system with strong parties and more limited individualised incentives; many West European systems have strong parliamentary parties, a clear division of labour within them and a semi-open electoral system. It is likely that party-level incentives play an important role in the use of parliamentary questions as well. Second, the fact that parties are weaker and individual incentives are stronger in some systems does not mean that party-level explanations are completely useless even in those cases. For example, even when focusing on constituency issues, an individual MP might choose to focus on cases that are highly salient to their party.

## Data and methods

We make use of the official record of parliamentary questions and answers, as published in *Officiële Bekendmakingen* (2015). The dataset runs from 1994 to the end of 2014; we exclude the very short 2002–2003 parliament, as normal parliamentary operations were hardly established by the time the government

resigned. The metadata of the official records include the questioners (MPs) and responders (ministers), as well as a topic classification and the date the question was asked and answered. The files were downloaded and pre-processed with purpose-written scripts.<sup>2</sup> The full dataset includes 48,429 questions.

Our unit of analysis is the party–minister pair per parliamentary period: for example, the number of questions the Labour Party (PvdA) asked the Minister for Defence in the 2003–2006 parliament. We include all parties for which data is available, which excludes split-off parties (as they are not included for our electoral and manifesto-based measurement) and some smaller (or short-lived) parties, which were not included in the surveys used. Our analysis contains 1462 party–minister pairs in total. There is variation in the number of questions individual MPs ask (see Online Appendix 1), both between and within parties. Except for very small parties, however, we see no evidence of individual MPs dominating questioning on behalf of their party. Therefore, it is unlikely that party-level patterns might in fact be largely the result of the choices of a few individual MPs.

Our dependent variable, *the number of questions* asked, is measured in two ways. Firstly, we look simply at the number of questions put by each party to each minister.<sup>3</sup> Our statistical model will take differences in the length of parliamentary terms and ministerial tenure into account. Secondly, we look at the share of questions to a particular minister asked by each party. By focusing on the share of questions to each minister, we exclude variation in the number of questions asked to each minister, which is not the focus of our analysis. Previous analyses have shown that media attention has a large impact on the topics covered in parliamentary questions (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). The second way to measure our dependent variable effectively controls for this.<sup>4</sup>

Our measure of *issue saliency* is based on manual coding of party manifestos for each election from 1994 to 2012. Each paragraph in the manifesto was classified according to one of the categories of the Comparative Agendas Project. The work was done by trained coders. Only those coders were allowed to participate who had reached a Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  of at least 0.80 in their training work. The coding work was done in two coding rounds: first, the coders assigned each paragraph to one of 21 substantive categories (healthcare, defence, etc.). These codes were then reviewed by an expert coder. Next, the codes were split into around 10 subcategories per main category (e.g. hospitals or military installations). This second coding round was meant to assess the correct coding in the main categories as well. Inconsistencies were reviewed by an expert coder. In a subsequent step, we determined which of these CAP subcategories corresponded to each minister's portfolio. For each party we added up total attention to these issues, which effectively means that we arrive at a measure of how salient each minister's portfolio was to each party.<sup>5</sup>

The *programmatic difference* between the party of the MP asking a question and the party of the minister answering it is based on Chapel Hill Expert Survey estimates (2006 and 2010) (Bakker *et al.* 2015). We calculated the absolute difference between the MP's party and the minister's party on the left-right dimension.<sup>6</sup>

We measured the *electoral competition* between the MP's party and the minister's party in terms of their overlapping electoral appeal. We use the 'probability of a future vote' (PTV) scores available in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) (Stichting Kiezersonderzoek Nederland 2010).<sup>7</sup> Each respondent was asked how likely they were to vote for each party in the future, on an 11-point scale from 'certainly never' to 'sometime certainly'. Our variable catches the share of voters who said they gave a voting probability of at least 7 on the 0–10 scale for both parties. For example, in the 1998 election 1429 voters gave PvdA or CDA a PTV score of 6 or higher; 402 of them gave *both* parties 7 or higher. This translates to  $402/1429 = 28.1\%$  overlap. In the same year, the overlap between the PvdA and the extreme-right Centre Democrats was only 18 out of 1157 voters (1.5%). This measures scores high if parties were targeting the same group of voters. When the MP asking the question and the minister belonged to the same party, we awarded a score of 0 for electoral competition, as electoral competition between parties cannot play a role.<sup>8</sup>

As for our control variables, *opposition party* is simply a dummy variable that equals 1 when a party was in opposition. We do not code the Party for Freedom (PVV) as an opposition party during the 2010–2012 term, as it acted as a support party to the minority right-wing cabinet Rutte-I. *Question put to party colleague* equals 1 when the MP asking the question and the minister answering it belonged to the same party. *Party size* is measured in terms of the logged number of seats; we expect larger parties to ask more questions than smaller ones, but that the marginal effect of additional members is expected to decrease. Depending on the dependent variable used, some of our models contain a variable that indicates the *portfolio* of the (junior) minister, which is manually coded, while other specifications control for the number of parties in parliament.<sup>9</sup>

Our analysis of the data has to take the dyadic (party-minister) structure of the data into account. Therefore, we run multilevel regression models with three (cross-classified) levels: the parliamentary term, the party asking the question and the individual level. As discussed above, we have two versions of the dependent variable. The first is simply the raw count of questions,<sup>10</sup> which is modelled through a Poisson regression with an offset term for the number of days the minister was in office during that particular term, to account for between-term differences (some parliaments were longer than others) and between-minister differences (some ministers resigned early or took office later). We include portfolio dummy variables to capture differences in the popularity of asking questions to each ministerial department (as a result of media

attention, for example). We deal with over-dispersion in the model by including an individual-level random effect, which is a recommended approach for multilevel Poisson models (Elston *et al.* 2001; Lee and Nelder 2000).<sup>11</sup> We run this specification both on the full dataset as well as on a dataset that excludes government parties asking questions to their own ministers to check the robustness of the results.

Our second set of models captures the share of questions to a particular minister asked by each party. We model this using a binomial link in which the number of questions asked by the party is the number of successes, and the number of questions asked by another party is the number of failures. We include the number of parties in a parliamentary term as a control variable here, because as the number of parties increases, the average share of questions asked by each party drops. Over-dispersion is addressed by including an individual-level random effect (Browne *et al.* 2005). Again we run two versions of this model: with and without parties asking questions to their 'own' ministers.

## Results

On average, parties put about 25 questions to each (junior) minister during each of our terms (see Table 1). Taking into account the average length of each term, this amounts to just over 10 questions per year. There is, however, huge variation: some ministers are not being asked anything by some parties, while the Minister for Health received over 118 questions *per year* from the Socialist Party (SP) during the 2010–2012 parliament. Expressed in terms of the proportion of questions to each minister, the average party put 11% of the questions to each minister, ranging from 0% to 45%. As an example, our highest value is 45, which means that between 2003 and 2006 the Labour Party asked 45% of all the questions which were posed to Mark Rutte, who was junior Minister for Social Affairs at the time.

We study the correlates of this variation in the multilevel models reported in Table 2. As explained, we run two models: one with the raw number of questions asked as the dependent variable (Table 2, models 1 and 2) and another

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Questions	1462	25.47	33.35	0.00	15.00	274.00
Proportion of questions asked to minister	1462	0.11	0.09	0.00	0.09	0.45
Programmatic difference	1462	2.25	1.64	0.00	2.09	5.81
Electoral competition	1462	0.15	0.13	0.00	0.13	0.47
Issue saliency	1462	3.77	3.50	0.00	2.92	24.13
Opposition party	1462	0.68	0.47	0.00	1.00	1.00
Question asked to party colleague	1462	0.11	0.32	0.00	0.00	1.00
Party size	1462	16.47	14.16	2.00	11.00	45.00
Number of parties	1462	9.96	1.31	8.00	10.00	12.00

Note: The table only includes valid cases used in the regression analyses.

**Table 2.** Regression models explaining questions asked by parties to ministers.

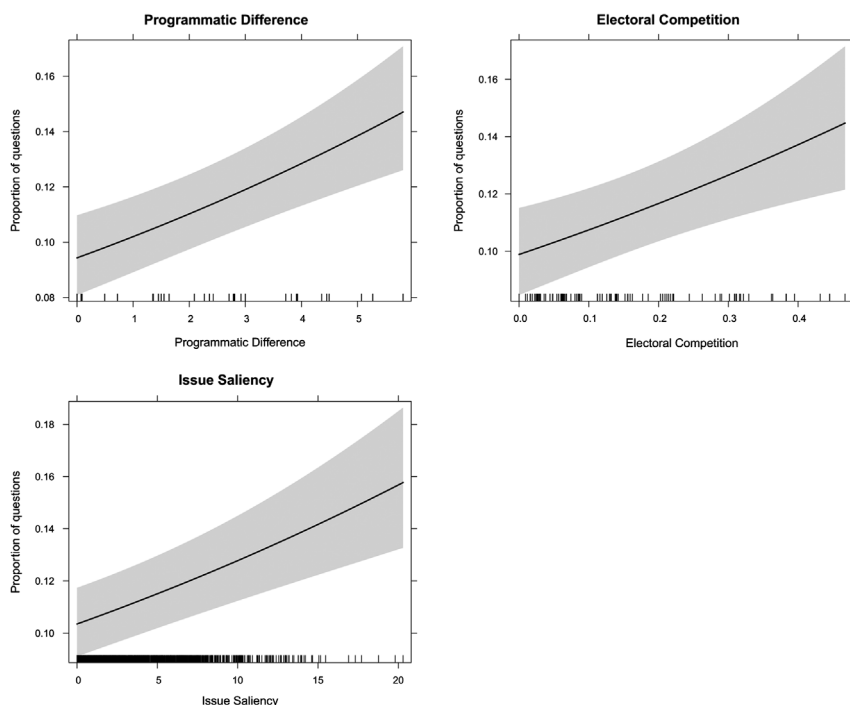
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	-8.31*** (0.25)	-8.18*** (0.26)	-5.45*** (0.55)	-5.46*** (0.55)
Programmatic difference	0.11*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
Electoral competition	1.16*** (0.33)	1.20*** (0.35)	0.96*** (0.28)	0.94** (0.31)
Issue saliency	0.10*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Opposition party	0.67*** (0.12)	0.65*** (0.12)	0.73*** (0.14)	0.72*** (0.14)
Question asked to party colleague	0.45** (0.15)		0.34** (0.13)	
Party size (ln)	0.78*** (0.06)	0.77*** (0.06)	0.88*** (0.06)	0.88*** (0.07)
Number of parties			-0.00 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)
Portfolio dummy variables	Yes	Yes	No	No
AIC	10885.19	9540.80	9907.98	8725.06
BIC	11006.80	9654.50	9966.15	8776.74
Log likelihood	-5419.59	-4748.40	-4942.99	-4352.53
Num. obs.	1462	1297	1462	1297
Num. groups: Party:Period	54	54	54	54
Num. groups: Period	6	6	6	6
Var: observation (Intercept)	0.44	0.44	0.24	0.25
Var: Party:Period (Intercept)	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.12
Var: Period (Intercept)	0.07	0.07	0.01	0.01

Notes: Poisson regression coefficients (models 1 and 2) and binomial logistic regression coefficients (models 3 and 4) with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

with the dependent variable being the proportion of questions to a minister being asked by a certain party (Table 2, models 3 and 4). The findings are quite similar between models, so we will focus on model 3 in our discussion of the results, which is the binomial logistic model of the full dataset. Figure 1 presents expected values of the dependent variable for different values of our independent variables, keeping all other variables at their mean. This helps to interpret the size of the effects found.<sup>12</sup>

The percentage of questions asked increases from 10.4% for non-salient issues to 16.3% for highly salient issues, keeping other variables at their mean ( $p < 0.001$ ). This might seem a modest difference, but it does represent a 58% increase in questions when moving from the minimum to the maximum level of saliency. Moreover, the effect is even more pronounced in the count models, where we see an increase from 13 to 140 questions asked when moving from minimum to maximum saliency levels. This probably reflects that some portfolios are more salient to most parties, which is reflected in overall higher levels of questions to that minister, even beyond what our portfolio dummy variables pick up on. All in all, our analysis shows that parties consistently prioritise some issues over others, both in their manifestos and in their parliamentary questions.



**Figure 1.** Expected values of proportion of questions asked.

Note: Effect plots based on model 3 in Table 2. Shaded areas/bars display 95% confidence intervals.

Programmatic differences between the party of the MP asking a question and the minister answering it also play a role in explaining the proportion of questions asked. Parties ask more questions of ministers they disagree with (14.6%) than of those they agree with (9.4%). This effect is statistically significant at the 0.001 level.

The effect of electoral competition suggests that parties target ministers from parties that target the same voters. If there is no electoral overlap at all between the questioner's and minister's party, meaning that no voters in the election study gave both parties a high probability for a future vote, we expect about 9.8% of the questions to the minister to come from that party, rising to 14.6% if there was a high electoral overlap between the parties. This is again significant effect at the 0.001 level. The effect remains very similar when we control for the (logged) size of the minister's party (not reported), meaning that this is not just a question of targeting the large government parties. Moreover, the effect is also replicated when we exclude parties asking questions of their own minister from the analysis.

Party size has a significant and large effect: the smallest parties in our data (those with two seats) can be expected to put 1.9% of the questions to a minister, while the largest parties in the dataset (45 seats) are estimated to put 23.5% of



the questions to a minister. This is, of course, not surprising given that these parties hold 1.3% and 30% of seats in the parliament, respectively.

Our models show that an individual opposition party asks an estimated 13.8% of all parliamentary questions of a minister. An average government party puts an estimated 7.2% of all parliamentary questions to a minister. When we compare opposition and government parties of equal size, the opposition party is expected to ask considerably more questions. In addition to this difference between opposition and government parties, one might also expect the impact of issue saliency, programmatic distance and electoral competition to be stronger for opposition parties, as they are the ones that stand to gain the most by politicising the written questions instrument. When we interact our three main independent variables with government or opposition party status, we do find a stronger saliency effect for opposition parties, but no difference in the effect of programmatic distance and electoral competition (see Online Appendix 4). This seems to suggest that in the Dutch case, parliamentary questions are not only used for party political purposes by the opposition, but by government parties as well. We also control for asking a question of a party colleague: we find a smaller difference in the proportion of questions put to ministers from the same party (14.5%) and from different parties (10.8%).<sup>13</sup>

All in all, we find strong support for our three hypotheses: the issue saliency, programmatic difference and electoral competition hypotheses. This means that our overall theoretical expectation of parties focusing their questions based on both policy and votes is supported by the analysis of the Dutch parliament.

## Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that the use of parliamentary questions can be explained by the competition between parties, in terms of both policy and votes. We observed three key patterns: first, parties use questions to mark their own territory. That is, they focus on issues that are salient to them, which in turn is likely to strengthen their issue ownership on those topics. This confirms earlier work by Green-Pedersen (2010) on the Danish case. Second, parties ask more questions of ideologically distant government ministers than of ideologically close government ministers. There might be two different mechanisms at work. In substantive terms, parties might simply have fewer substantive policy disagreements with government parties to which they are closer ideologically. In strategic terms, parties are likely to avoid picking fights with parties that after the next elections may become their government partners. Our third main finding is that parties target their direct electoral competitors in parliamentary questions: this appears to sustain the notion that parties use questions to draw negative attention to parties that compete for the same voters in order to convince those voters no longer to vote for those parties. This second and third result may seem contradictory: parties focus their attention on parties



that share the same voters but are ideologically more distant. In order to understand this, one should note that we used the left-right dimension (dominant for policy-making) to analyse the distance between parties and that we used the overlap of potential voters to measure the electoral overlap. These measures do not correlate because class and religion also play a role in structuring voting behaviour. So parties are likely to ask questions of ministers from parties that are *ideologically distant* and parties that are *electorally similar*.

In line with Maatoug's (2013) analysis of parliamentary questions in the Netherlands, coalition parties seem not to be using parliamentary tools to 'keep tabs' on their coalition partners. They seem to be putting as many questions to their own ministers as to the ministers of other parties. Perhaps this is a paradoxical consequence of ministerial portfolio allocation: parties will generally try to obtain portfolios that are salient to them, which in turn might be a reason to ask more parliamentary questions about this issue to signal the importance of the issue to voters. Alternatively, government parties might simply have better tools at their disposal for intra-coalition checks, such as the allocation of junior ministers or bargaining delays in parliamentary committees (Kim and Loewenberg 2005; Martin and Vanberg 2004).

All in all, we find more support for the use of parliamentary questions to strengthen a party's own (policy) profile rather than to weaken the position of an opponent. Of course, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on whether there is an audience for parliamentary questions. One audience is internal to the parliamentary arena: parties might use a consistent line of questioning on a topic to build up a reputation among other parties, ministers and civil servants. There is also an external audience of voters, journalists and other external organisations. It is difficult to strengthen 'issue ownership' if nobody (outside of parliament) knows about the questions. Analysis of the relationship between media coverage and parliamentary questions suggests that coverage informing (oral) questions is generally more extensive than coverage of the actual questions (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014). Still, even written questions do get reported regularly. Some MPs purposely follow through on a line of questioning, asking tens of questions on the same specific issue to 'mark their territory' within parliament, as well as in media coverage (Schweers 2012; Visscher 2006: 95). Further research could expand on this relationship between the media dimension of parliamentary questions and the party political side. If issue ownership is an important reason for parties to table questions, under what circumstances do they succeed in receiving the necessary media attention? Another way to extend the party-level analysis of parliamentary questions is to look at the inter-party dynamics in asking parliamentary questions: do parties respond to other parliamentary parties in terms of the topics they pay attention to in parliamentary questions? (Vliegenthart *et al.* 2011).

Our analysis focuses on the case of the Netherlands, where the party dimension is arguably more important than the individual level in explaining the use

of parliamentary questions. As such, the Netherlands is a likely case in which to find these patterns; parties have been shown to matter in systems similar to the Dutch one, such as Denmark or Germany (Green-Pedersen 2010; Mickler 2017). Future research could test to what extent our expectations hold in systems in which individual-level explanations of parliamentary questioning are also pertinent (Martin 2011b). It is likely that for many systems in between the extremes of the British system of individual electoral incentives and the Dutch system of strong party control and division of labour, there are many systems in which both party strategies and individual incentives play a role. In this article, we have opted to aggregate all data at the party level. This was justified given what we know of the Dutch case, and it yielded clear results. Future research may want to study how individual-level incentives and party-level strategies interact. A multilevel model that incorporates both individual and party-level variables may be justified here. Interesting patterns may be observed in the interplay between these two factors: which MPs are more likely to follow the priorities that the party laid down in its manifesto and which MPs are more likely to ignore them? Perhaps MPs are more likely to ask critical questions of ministers from parties with which they are directly competing in their own district, rather than the parties that have a greater electoral overlap.

## Notes

1. As our measurement will focus on the issues that are salient to parties, rather than the more specific question of which issues they 'own', we phrase our hypothesis in terms of the former.
2. We used the *Aanhangsels van de Handelingen* ('Supplement to the Official Records') that included both question and answer for all written questions. We excluded *Mededelingen* ('Announcements') which stated that questions would be answered at a later stage (or that questions were retracted). Note that the metadata do contain some errors, particularly when the questioner or responder was incorrectly identified or not all of the actors were identified. We matched the names in the metadata against a list of MPs and ministers obtained from the Parliamentary Documentation Centre (Parlementair Documentatie Centrum 2010). Still, errors will remain, but are unlikely to affect our analysis greatly because of the large volume of questions in the dataset.
3. A single question can be addressed to multiple ministers, in which case it is counted as  $1/n$ -th of a question, where  $n$  is the number of ministers. In (the infrequent) case of multiple parties asking a question (about 7% of the questions in the full dataset were asked by MPs from more than one party), the question was counted for each party.
4. One can also use the number of questions asked of a minister as a percentage of all questions asked by a party as the dependent variable (see Online Appendix 2). This does not, however, control for between-portfolio differences.
5. Our main analyses exclude six cases with very high saliency scores (>25%), but the results are similar when these are included.

6. We also employed a measure that looked at the specific issue dimensions that are likely to matter for a specific minister (for example, environment for the Infrastructure and Environment Minister): we matched each minister's portfolio to one or more of the dimensions available in that survey (Bakker *et al.* 2015). We calculated the mean absolute difference between the MP's party and the minister's party on the relevant dimensions. When we also included the left-right distance measure in our statistical models, the portfolio-specific distance seemed not to have any impact. This reinforces earlier findings that in the Dutch parliament the left-right dimension is far stronger than other ideological dimensions (Otjes 2011).
7. We take the electoral competition in the previous elections, for example the 1998 elections for the 1998–2002 parliament. For the 1994–1998 parliament, we use data from the 1998 election study, as this includes the Socialist Party.
8. Note that our model includes a dummy variable when questioner and responder are members of the same party. Therefore, it does not in fact matter whether we assign MPs/ministers from the same party a code of 0 or 1 on the variable electoral competition. In addition, we replicated our models when excluding these cases of the MP and minister belonging to the same party. This does not affect the findings regarding the impact of electoral competition.
9. The names and exact responsibilities of ministries changed over the years, but we tried to keep them constant. There are 14 categories for this variable.
10. Because a question can be asked of multiple ministers (see above), some of the counts contain fractions, which we round to the nearest whole numbers. The same is true for the binomial link models.
11. Online Appendix 3 contains alternative approaches to dealing with over-dispersion in our data. This does not affect the findings presented here.
12. Note that these 'effect plots' only take into account the fixed effects of the model, not the random effects.
13. As our model controls for being an opposition or government party, the coefficient for 'Question asked to party colleague' can be interpreted directly as the effect for government parties.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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